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Fisher - Fast Day Sermon. Apr. 6, 1860.

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NATIONAL FAULTS.

A

SERMON,

DELIVERED IN THE

CHAPEL OF YALE COLLEGE,

ON FAST DAY, APRIL 6th, 1860,

BY

GEORGE P. FISHER,

LIVINGSTON PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY IN YALE COLLEGE.

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SERMON.

JEREMIAH 9: 23, 24.

THUS SAITH THE LORD: 'LET NOT THE WISE MAN GLORY IN HIS WISDOM, NEITHER LET THE MIGHTY MAN GLORY IN HIS MIGHT, LET NOT THE RICH MAN GLORY IN HIS RICHES: BUT LET HIM THAT GLORIETH, GLORY IN THIS, THAT HE UNDERSTANDETH AND KNOWETH ME, THAT I AM THE LORD WHICH EXERCISE LOVINGKINDNESS, JUDGMENT, AND RIGHTEOUSNESS, IN THE EARTH: FOR IN THESE THINGS I DELIGHT, SAITH THE LORD.'

THE true greatness of a nation does not lie in the extent of its territory. Attica was not so large as the little state of Delaware. Nor does it depend on the number of its population. If it does, then China is a nobler kingdom than England. Nor can we measure the greatness of a people by their wealth; since the richest nation, like the richest man, may be the meanest. Not even excellence in Art and Science is sufficient of itself to give real and lasting elevation to the mind of a nation. By mournful examples in history we are taught that the lustre which the culture of the intellect reflects on the civilization of a country, may cover slavish vices and co-exist with national weakness and sorrow.

The worth of a nation, as of an individual, depends on its *character*. Other advantages, like those which have been named, may serve to strengthen and embellish character, but they cannot supply the place of this cardinal element. And on what foundation does true character repose? On no other than the devout acknowledgment of God. The practical and constant recognition of His Power, Beneficence and Authority, is the basis of worthy character. Nothing else can save a man, nothing else can save a nation, from the evil tendencies of human nature, which, when not controlled by religion, lead surely to ruin.

Of this truth we are reminded by the text. Having bewailed the sins of his nation, the eloquent prophet exhorts the people

to cherish, in the midst of prosperity, a spirit of dependence and devotion. Let not the wise glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty glory in his might, let not the rich glory in his riches; let none plume themselves on these gifts, but let all find their joy in the knowledge of a righteous and merciful God. To Him let all prosperity be thankfully ascribed; to Him let prayer be humbly offered; to His laws let obedience be strictly rendered.

That righteousness is the solid foundation of national greatness, is the truth that lay deep in the heart of the Fathers of New England. The fear and the love of God were their ruling sentiments, and hence in framing the civil and religious institutions under which these commonwealths have been so prosperous, they had regard chiefly to the spiritual welfare of the people. The right and duty of every man to commune directly with the Father and Redeemer of his soul, was the idea which they were most earnest to embody and illustrate. Through the resolute assertion of this main principle of the Protestant Faith, the Puritan party to which they belonged, rescued the English church from the Papacy, and the state from despotism. To found a civil community in which this idea should be, not merely a doctrine, but a life, in which the dignity of the soul and the greatness of God should not be obscured by the pomp of forms; where men should bend the knee only before their Maker, and worship Him in spirit and in truth; where the laws of God should be re-asserted in the enactments of human government, and a sense of accountableness to Him pervade the hearts of the people—to found such a community, was the aim of our Fathers. They acknowledged God in all their ways, and built their hopes of success on His wise and merciful decrees.

On a day of public humiliation, it is well to observe the signs of a departure from this true foundation of national greatness. That our country is destined to be not only vast in territorial extent, but very populous and rich, will not be doubted; and while, notwithstanding the unparalleled diffusion of knowledge among all classes, we are comparatively an unlearned nation, yet, as we may rationally hope, our country will one day ascend to an eminence on the field of science.

He who loves his country and loves the interests of humanity, which Providence has committed to her keeping, will watch with most anxiety, the principles that inspire the heart of the nation. Are they the eternal principles on the recognition of which God has made the welfare, nay, the permanent existence of a nation to depend? From a fidelity to these principles, which are the ground-work of our history, our renown as well as our happiness must be derived. What have we to win the esteem of our fellow men? We have no pre-eminence with respect to natural scenery, even if merit could be derived from the configuration of the land; we have no immense libraries to commemorate the wisdom and the folly of the past; we have no galleries of art—store-houses of beauty—such as the older countries can exhibit; our literature, however promising, is meagre when we are compared with the foremost of the nations. We have nothing to gain for us special honor in the view of mankind, but our moral and religious principles; by these we have earned our fame. When these are gone, we lose our power to command the respect of the world.

I intend—briefly, and not without diffidence—to allude to some things which indicate a growing forgetfulness on the part of the people, of the true basis of national worth.

Our national faults are, for the most part, those which belong to a young and free people, elated by a sense of power, and by a material growth that is without example. When we remember the corruption of human nature, it is not strange to find so prosperous a people departing from God.

The first sign of such a departure, to be named, is the *vainglorious spirit* of the nation.

Our fathers, like the English, from whom most of them sprung, if they had either fault, were proud rather than vain; and pride is not so mean a vice as vanity. They were men of few words and strong deeds, satisfied with the approval of their own consciences. The Americans are now a boastful people, courting the admiration of men, and angry when it is withheld. This quality of our character is well understood throughout the civilized word, and affixes a stigma on our name. We are represented abroad as a nation of braggarts, which is a carica-

ture indeed, but a caricature has a resemblance to the truth. One ground of this sensitive and feverish regard for the applause of other nations, is the consciousness on our part, that our position among them is not clearly and firmly fixed. Society is forming, and not yet fully formed in this country; and the type of civilization which will grow out of the fusion of many races, cannot be easily foretold. Hence our pretensions are questioned, and we are challenged, as it were, by the nations to make good our claims to their respect. But these claims are not to be verified by the use of high-sounding words, but by manly deeds; by the development of the mind of the nation through an activity that derives motive and help from a solemn reliance on God.

A vain people, like a vain individual, is exposed to the temptation of seeking to draw the attention and compel the homage of men by criminal actions. An enterprise that tends to make its power conspicuous and notorious, however wicked the undertaking may be, is embraced with headlong ardor. And it requires no uncommon penetration to perceive that the vanity of this nation threatens to add to the pages of our history, a catalogue of crimes.

Another sign of a departure from God on the part of this people, is their *inordinate love of money.* We are not less famous for avarice, than for vanity. Foreigners, indeed, often mistake for a sordid vice the simple passion for the excitement of trade; and there is no land where money is so freely given by the people for amusement and for charity. Still it remains true, that the activity of the country is mainly turned into one channel. It is devoted to the pursuit of wealth; and with an intensity so absorbing, as to amaze the older and slower nations, and greatly to hinder the progress of religion among us. The degrading power of this hateful passion is seen everywhere. It hatches utilitarian standards of judgment, in the lowest sense of that epithet; and thus threatens to bring down our public education into a mere instrument for promoting the industrial interests of the country. It interferes with the repose of domestic life, and robs home of half of its charm. It breeds other vices, as agents for executing its will, which

are, if possible, more hurtful than itself. The inordinate love of wealth is the root of all evil. Trained to the art of getting money, men are made shrewd; so that an odious cunning is ascribed to our people as a national trait. The eagerness to be rich, moreover, makes men unscrupulous in regard to the means which they employ; so that very much of what is called business, is nothing better than gambling. The moral laws which ought to govern the accumulation of wealth, are disregarded in the selfish and dishonest practice of the multitude. The pecuniary troubles in which the country is, from time to time, involved, are the legitimate result of this national wickedness. And the only cause of mourning is, that the suffering falls, in so large a measure, to the lot of the innocent class. Twenty-five years ago, Dr. Channing wrote these words: "Our present civilization is characterized and tainted by a devouring greediness for wealth; the passion for gain, is everywhere sapping pure and generous feeling, and raising up bitter foes against any reform which may threaten to turn aside the stream of wealth." The statement of this pure-minded philanthropist is more true at the present, than when he uttered it. There is, let it be gladly acknowledged, a thirst for knowledge in the hearts of our countrymen. Yet this, like the love of money, is too commonly an impetuous eagerness to grasp the fruits of science, without bestowing the patient labor which is requisite for their growth. In the pursuit of knowledge, short and easy ways are sought, in place of a slow and laborious ascent; so that the amplest facilities for education do not save us from a one-sided and superficial culture. And the desire of knowledge, as we have hinted, is not a barrier that can stay the love of money. A man who devotes himself to a branch of science that is not lucrative—that does not bring to him an immediate remuneration in money—is a public phenomenon,—so diverse is his motive from that which governs his fellow men. If the theories of education which would drag down the classical and religious studies from the eminence which they have held since the revival of learning, are to prevail in this country; and if the energy with which the mind of the nation is devoted to the development of a material and earthly prosperity, is to be strengthened instead of weakened, then this land, which was

consecrated to God and the welfare of the race, will be reduced to a province of Mammon. For noble sentiments will never grow up, they will wither and die, in the bosom of a selfish and sordid nation.

A third sign of an irreligious feeling, *is the deference that is paid to Political Parties and party leaders.* When men forget to consult the will of God, they feel the need of some other guidance. Hence, they divide into two classes, of which the first and smaller includes the leaders, and the second composes the multidude who are led by them. In a republic, parties will always exist; and there is special need of religion to prevent the conscience of the individual from being merged in the will of the party. The obligation to party may be so exaggerated as to be rendered paramount to the duty of Patriotism. To the interests of party, the convictions of the individual judgment are sacrificed. Hence, while men suppose themselves to be acting freely, they are often the slaves of a faction. While they think themselves to be sovereigns, they are the tools of the Demagogue. For it is the art of the Demagogue to flatter the people whom he would delude, by pretending to be their servant and by prating about their sovereignty. His success depends on his ability to organize parties and keep them bound in his service. It is this class of men who are dangerous in a country like ours: men described by Lord Bacon as never caring "in all tempests what becomes of the ship of state, so they may save themselves in the cock-boat of their own fortunes." No country presents a more alluring field for corrupt politicians of this sort, than our own. Not to allude to several facts which will readily occur, it is sufficient to suggest, in connection with the topic, the power which oratory has over the popular mind. Aristotle styled a Republic "an Aristocracy of Orators." Nothing can prevent a Republic from becoming this, and from thus falling into the hands of demagogues, but the power of a clear and strong conscience in the minds of men. Religious principle and the intelligence which religion fosters, are the only means of disarming the orators. The tendency of the nation to give the ascendency to bold and eloquent leaders, is greatly favored by the passionate love of public speaking. In

no other country of the world are so many speeches made and so many resolutions passed. The ability to make a fine speech is considered an invaluable attainment. Many look upon liberal studies as chiefly designed to qualify men to make speeches; so that if not the chief end of man, the chief end of educated man is to make a speech. It is true of most men, that they feel more than they think; and if they are not made reflective and conscientious by the influence of religion, their feelings are easily inflamed and misled by the impassioned appeals of the subtle politician. Men of honor and integrity at length become tired of popular caprice. They shrink from the artifice and immodest pretension, that seem requisite to ensure political success. They retire from the arena of politics and leave the management of affairs to baser men. Persons who can be chosen are nominated for public offices, instead of those who ought to be chosen; and in the administration of the government we miss the forecast, the dignity, and the disinterested spirit that characterize the doings of true statesmen. Thus the government ceases to awaken the reverence or affection of the citizen; and sad is the condition of a country which is compelled to look upon the government of its choice, with feelings of contempt or of shame.

Another sign of a departure from God, *is the want of Reverence in the national character.*

Children are early imbued with the faith that the magistrate is merely the servant of the citizen. Into their minds is instilled the doctrine of the liberty and equality of men. Far be it from us to question the truth and the importance of these ideas. They underlie our institutions in the Church and State. But one truth is often dangerous unless it is accompanied by another to qualify it or to complete it. It is perilous for a man to learn his freedom without at the same time learning his dependence. It is perilous for him to be told that he is powerful, unless he is also assured that he is accountable. Let democratical ideas be taught, in conjunction with the responsibleness of man to God, and devotion to human rights will go hand in hand with the veneration of the Most High. The idea of freedom will be a sacred treasure of the heart, instead of being

held with boastful passion. Take away the religious element, and you have surely self-conceit and irreverence. Therefore the spirit of irreverence which is characteristic of our country, evinces a departure from God. This want of reverence for what is worthy of veneration, is a blemish which no other trait of character can atone for. Unlovely in itself, it is the parent of a troop of faults. It renders the manners of the people pert and harsh, thus taking from social life the order that is dependent on a due regard for age and rank. It creates in the public mind a jealousy of authority, however needful and salutary, and leads the unthinking to confound factious insubordination with manliness. It begets a vulgar disrespect for the past, as if wisdom entered the world at the birth of the present generation, and is destined to depart with us. It causes men to reject, with frivolous haste, doctrines which are commended by the voice of concurrent ages, and broach as new discoveries, theories which were long ago examined and exploded. It leads politicians to substitute, as a practical guide, what is called "manifest destiny," for immutable morality. For when a prosperous nation is freed from revering God, and thus puffed up by a sense of its own merits, it imagines that all things are subservient to its own interests. It holds lightly the faith of treaties and the law of nations, and breaks over the restraints which the commands of God impose, as well upon the nation, as upon the individual. Justice towards man will not long outlive piety towards God. He who robs his Maker, will defraud his brother. The spirit of irreverence is by no means content with seducing a soul from allegiance to God; and the nation in whose heart there dwells not an abiding sense of the Divine presence, quickly enters on a career of aggression. On such a career, this country is preparing to enter; and unless held back by the awakened power of religion, we shall stain our annals with records of national perfidy and aggression. Nothing can give repose to the character; nothing can permanently uphold the order of society; nothing can restrain the people from invading the rights of other nations, but a returning veneration for God.

I notice, in the last place, *the rash self-confidence that char-*

acterizes our people. No nation is so full of hope as our own. None is so free from apprehension as to the future. It is a trait characteristic of youth, and of inexperience in adversity. There is little real fear in the heart of the nation. The thing which excites most dread, if one may judge from what he hears, is not social covulsion or foreign enemies, but the dissolution of the federal union,—the rupture of the confederacy of states. And even this fear has so little depth, that in consequence of it, the public securities in the markets of the world have never declined a farthing. He who expresses a misgiving as to the success of this experiment of free government, is ridiculed as an alarmist. His notions are ascribed to a gloomy temperament, or to age which renders men over-cautious, or to disappointed ambition. Now, if this confident spirit were an intelligent trust in Divine Providence; if it were founded in the consciousness that we are obeying the laws on which the perpetuity and glory of a state depend,—then, it would be well. But it is very often a mere trust in our luck. It is an exhilaration of feeling, not warranted by reason. It is a flow of animal spirits, which have not been cooled and checked by suffering. Other nations have endured calamities, and have fallen from their heights of power and happiness; but we shall not. It is the feeling of a young man who has never known trouble. To be sure, mankind suffers,—but he will not: he will be exempt. I call this a *rash* self-confidence, because the experiment which we are trying is not yet finished; and whereas it has been conducted hitherto under the most favorable conditions, the prospect is that greater hazards and new and more perilous circumstances are before us. A ship may ride in safety about the harbor: it is staunch and strong when newly made: but how will it endure the storms of mid ocean? You require a long voyage to test it. Our system gives political power to the whole people—to natives and immigrants—be their education, their character, their property, their degree of interest in the stability and welfare of society, what it may. The political leader who cherished this idea at the formation of the general government, carried the day; and universal suffrage—the African always excepted, whom the white people of this country choose to mark with distinctions of disgrace—is an un-

changeable fact—an established feature in our system. It has been tried in a country sparse in population, and divided up into towns and small cities, and by a generation that inherited moral principle and a patriotic spirit from their fathers. The conditions are rapidly changing. The older portions of the country are becoming crowded with population. Great cities have sprung up, containing as all great cities will, hordes of men, stimulated by poverty and by dislike to more favored classes, and ready for anything that promises to improve their condition. The number of voters who are venal,—prepared to sell their ballots to the highest bidder,—or swayed by base motives of some sort; who are subservient to priest or politician,—swells as time goes on. Causes of discontent in the laboring class, as that class becomes numerous, may not unlikely increase, and imperil society. The great interest at stake in our popular elections—I mean the selfish interest of parties and office-seekers—multiplies the temptations to fraud and violence, and to the use of unscrupulous appeals to the passions of the ignorant. What a mockery, when under the forms of free government, that party succeeds which can lavish the most money in bribery and corruption, or show superior skill in stuffing ballot-boxes with fictitious votes! Liberty has been destroyed on the continent of Europe by a process easily understood. The lower strata—the mass of the people—deprived of political power,—partly from oppression and partly from other causes, reduced to poverty,—at length break forth, as by a volcanic force. Their blindness and revenge bring anarchy and destruction to civilization; and despotism is the refuge from these worse evils. We have chosen to give to all classes in society—the ignorant alike with the learned, the poor and the rich,—political power,—a share in the government of the country. We have yet to see whether this method will work any better,—whether the ship of state escaping one rock, will not be wrecked upon another. We have had the advantage of being at a distance from other powerful states, and have thus avoided the necessary evil of vast standing armies, to drain the country of its wealth, excite military ambition, and foment discontent in the more indigent classes.

We have had an abundance of fertile territory open to emi-

gration from the whole states. We have had the memory, fresh in our hearts, of patriots who offered up their lives and fortunes on the altar of their country. We have been able to instruct and educate the people in schools open to all, where morals as well as the rudiments of learning were taught, and the love of knowledge awakened. It is to be hoped that under the new conditions of national existence which await us, we may still be saved from great and fatal disasters. But the empty self-confidence, not founded in a thoughtful study of our situation in the light of history and political science,—which prevails in the country, is unbecoming. We are not so safe that we do not need God to protect us. We are not so far on this voyage that we can throw away the maps and compass. We are not so secure that we do not need strenuous exertion on the part of all enlightened christian men, to elevate the people, to inspire them with intelligence and moderation, and prepare them to act their part as citizens. The assiduous, faithful, teacher of a school, in a place however obscure,—even the teacher of a sabbath school for the poor,—is rendering a truly noble service to the country in which he lives. We have in the characteristics of our political system, a motive to do good, to spread knowledge, to extend the kingdom of Christ, such as the christians of no other country possess. Upon exertions of this kind, our security, our well-being, the very existence of the institutions under which we live, must at last depend. The question to be decided is, whether these institutions can be continued, in consistency with good government, and the maintenance of rights and of order, or whether we are to be driven to a despotism, which if it suppresses individual freedom, prevents private aggression and preserves order. So much is certain, that mere self-confidence is not to carry us through the trial which, as every discerning person must see, awaits us in the future.

I do not forget the great and distinguished merit of our system, that it presents in the political privileges offered to all, an incentive to self-education, and a stimulating, awakening influence of the highest value. But it does not belong to my subject nor to the occasion to discuss the advantages of free

government; but to point out the errors and dangers which *may* render these unquestioned advantages of no avail.

These imperfect hints may, perhaps, suggest to the thoughtful some of the sins which call for special acknowledgment, on this day of Fasting and Prayer. Let us humble ourselves on account of our own forgetfulness of God, and implore forgiveness. Let us watch ourselves lest we be corrupted into a sympathy with national sins and a participation in national guilt. Let us consecrate ourselves, with holy resolution, to the work of doing what Heaven enables us to do, towards diffusing the knowledge of God and leading the hearts of our countrymen to venerate the Infinite Ruler. Would that the entire nation, smitten by a sense of guilt, might this day humiliate itself in the presence of the Most High! Would that the whole people, touched by the remembrance of Divine favor to this prosperous land, might bow in contrition before God, and beg His pardon for their unthankful disregard of His authority. Then could we hope, without misgiving, that the God of our Fathers would continue to make this a peaceful and a happy country. Then should we dread none of the disasters which a retributive Providence never fails to inflict upon a proud, an immoral, and ungodly nation.

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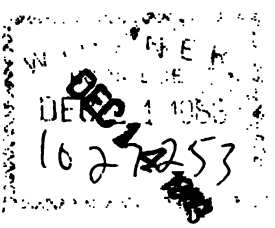

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